



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA FISHERIES PROPOSES TO DESIGNATE CRITICAL HABITAT TO PROTECT PUGET SOUND'S KILLER WHALES

NOAA Fisheries Service today announced a proposal to designate areas in and around Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca as critical habitat for killer whales. The Southern Resident killer whale, whose population is separate from other killer whale groups, appears in Puget Sound typically in May with some remaining into the fall months.

The area proposed for critical habitat designation encompasses parts of Haro Strait and the waters around the San Juan Islands, the Strait of Juan de Fuca and all of Puget Sound a total of just over 2,500 square miles. The agency is excluding from the designation 18 military sites covering nearly 112 square miles of habitat.

Once critical habitat is formally designated, possibly by the end of the year, federal agencies will be required to consult with NOAA Fisheries Service to ensure their actions will not destroy or adversely modify the killer whales' designated habitat. The agency is also producing a killer whale recovery plan, a requirement under the Endangered Species Act, which will be available for public comment later this month.

Listed as "endangered" in 2005, the Southern Resident killer whale population peaked in the 1990's at 97 animals then declined to 79 in 2001; currently there are 90 whales in existence with several calves recently born into the population.

The animals, which are actually the largest form of dolphin, spend the majority of their time in the Pacific Ocean. Males, generally larger than females, can reach almost 30 feet at maturity and weigh more than 15,000 pounds. Biologists at NOAA are heartened by the population increases in recent years, but remain concerned about water quality, availability of food (especially salmon), and the effects of boat traffic on the animals.

The agency will hold public meetings on the habitat-designation proposal at the Seattle Aquarium July 12 and in Friday Harbor July 13. Comments on the proposal may be sent to NOAA Fisheries Service until mid-August via e-mail at: orcahabitat.nwr@noaa.gov or by writing to: Chief - Protected Resources Division, 1201 NE Lloyd Blvd., Suite 100, Portland OR 97322-1274.

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NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitats through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of the nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, over 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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On the Web:

NOAA Fisheries Service: www.nmfs.noaa.gov

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